EXPANSIVE
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Psalm 71:1–6
Jeremiah 1:4–10
Luke 13:10–17

"The entire crowd was rejoicing
at all the wonderful things he was doing."
Luke 13:17 (NRSV)

In the future, when all that is to be known about God will be known,
when we no longer see, as we do now, only in part, I think
many of us will be surprised by the capacious generosity of God.
. . . Within the teachings of Jesus we have case after case of Jesus
pointing to a God who is larger than the conventional wisdom,
who is not downsized by the petty pieties of those who would
constrain him by their own limited knowledge and experience.

Peter Gomes
The Scandalous Gospel of Jesus

We come here this morning, as generations of people before
and as countless millions will come this day, into your presence:
bringing our lives into the context of your love and your will;
bringing the contents of our hearts, our joys and fears,
our sorrows and doubts and dreams.
As you have done down through the centuries,
startle us with your presence, your love, your grace
that includes and gathers us all into your embrace,
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Sometimes—even in church—surprising things happen.

William Willimon, longtime chaplain at Duke University and now a Methodist bishop, remembers a new member drive organized in the small congregation he was serving years ago. Groups of two were sent out on a Sunday afternoon with a city map and assigned streets to knock on doors and invite people to church. One elderly couple took their street map, turned left instead of right, and ended up in the "wrong" neighborhood. When they returned to report, Helen and Gladys said they had discovered a

real prospect, Verleen, who, indeed, not only showed up the next Sunday but signed up for the woman's Bible study, which Willimon himself led.

The topic was temptation, and Will began by asking, "Have any of you been faced with temptation and, with Jesus' help, resisted?" The responses were pretty mild: one woman confessed that she had been tempted to keep a loaf of bread the supermarket checkout clerk had neglected to charge her for.

Then Verleen spoke up: "A couple of years ago, I was into cocaine real big. . . . You know how that stuff makes you crazy. Well, anyway, my boyfriend—we knocked over a gas station, got $200. . . . He says to me, 'Let's knock over the Seven-Eleven.' And something says to me, 'No, I've held up the gas station with you, but no convenience store. He beat me . . . but I still said no. It felt great to say no. . . . Made me feel like somebody."

Willimon remembers that after he recovered, he mumbled something like, "Well, that's certainly resisting temptation."

In the parking lot later, as he was helping one of the longtime group members to her car, Helen said, "I can't wait to get home and get on the phone. Your Bible studies used to be dull. I think we could get a crowd for this."

Will reflects, "Time and time again in our life together, just when we get everything figured out, the pews all bolted down and everyone blissfully adjusted to the status quo, God intrudes, inserts someone like Verleen just to remind the baptized that God is large, unmanageable, and full of surprises" (William Willimon, *The Intrusive Word*, cited by Michael Lindvall in *A Geography of God*).

Something like that happened one day when Jesus was in the synagogue. It was the sabbath, the day when all work stopped for his people and people went to their village synagogue. Jesus was teaching that day, and a woman walked in and quickly took her seat. She was "stooped," a radical curvature of the spine. For eighteen years she's lived with it. A literal translation is "bent." It was more than a physical problem. In her culture, there was strong suspicion that a physical illness was the result of sin or, at the very least, being in the grip and under control of Satan. "A spirit crippled her," Luke says. And so her condition was not only incredibly painful, physically awkward—everything was difficult: sitting, eating, drinking, walking, undressing—and relentlessly embarrassing; it was also socially isolating. She was alone, lonely, always.

She doesn't ask for healing, doesn't ask for anything. Simply walks in as quietly as she can, sits down to listen. Jesus sees her, stops teaching, is compelled by what he sees, this heartbreaking, pathetic woman; calls her,

“Woman, you are set free from your ailment.” And when he places his hands on her, she stands up straight for the first time in eighteen years, looking someone in the face for the first time in eighteen years, and, understandably, begins praising God. All this right in the middle of the synagogue Sabbath lesson, with the small room crowded with people sitting on benches, men and boys on one side, women and girls on the other.

The leader of the synagogue, the person in charge, a good, solid member of the community, a faithful man who knows his religion in and out, is not only startled by this interruption in the lesson but very unhappy with Jesus’ behavior. It’s wrong. It’s against the law. He turns to the congregation and says something like, “It’s one thing to be a young idealist, passionate about human suffering, but be reasonable. There is a time and place for everything, and what he just did violates our sacred, holy law. Everyone knows that no work is to happen on the sdabbath. And everyone knows that healing has always been defined as a kind of work, just like cooking, making beds, taking out the trash. We have six days for that sort of thing. This day is for God, the Sabbath.” The man is indignant. “Jesus is way too cavalier about our holy law.” After all, all Jesus needed to say was the first-century equivalent of “Take two aspirin and call me in the morning.” Sabbath ended at 6:00 p.m. He could have said, “Sister, I’d like to help you. I can help you. Come back a few minutes after six.”

For Jesus, however, human need trumps religious law. For Jesus, religion ought to facilitate not prevent healing, wholeness, reconciliation, inclusion, restoration.

And so his response to the sharp reprimand is equally sharp: “Hypocrites!” This is not a gentle, meek, and mild savior, but God’s man, impatient, angry even, at the way his own religion to which he was devoted, the beautiful law that had sustained his people for centuries, was being used to prevent love from being expressed and healing from happening.

Now some underbrush needs to be cleared away. This is not an anti-Jewish story. Jesus was a Jew. Peter, James, and John were Jews. They all were Jews. This is a Jewish story taking place in a Jewish synagogue, a strong conflict between Jews about the meaning of a central, basic Jewish law and tradition. And the more you think about it, the more that conflict appears within our own religion, within all religions and their institutions and laws and rituals and traditions.

And it is not an anti-Sabbath, or anti-Sabbath keeping, story.

Remembering and keeping the Sabbath is central to Judaism. In fact, the idea of Sabbath—six days for work and the seventh for rest—is part of the genius of Judaism, as is the intriguing idea that this rhythm is built into

creation. In Genesis 1, the creation story, God rests. God takes a day off. God, Walter Brueggemann says, is tired, has been working all week, closes down the office, and goes home to rest. Brueggemann says it all comes from that time in Israel's history when they were slaves in Egypt, making bricks for Pharaoh's construction projects. There is no day off in slavery. When they ask for a day to make sacrifices to God, Pharaoh calls them lazy, takes the straw necessary for brick making away, and orders more bricks. There is no Sabbath when you are a slave. And so, Brueggemann says, Israel's insistence on a Sabbath is actually a declaration of independence from Pharaoh and all Pharaoh represents. Brueggemann observes how driven modern Americans are—driven by the marketplace, the consumer economy, which demands that we work harder and harder, all day everyday, to keep up and get ahead, a dynamic not unlike a kind of captivity or slavery that affects all of us, clergy, too: all of us who think it is a virtue worth bragging about that we work long hours, every day, that we can get by on a few hours' sleep. We even approach our leisure activities as if they were goals to reach, quotas to fill (see Walter Brueggemann, *Mandate to Change: You Can't Fool Your Nephesh*).

And so before we return to the conflict in the synagogue, a good word about the idea of Sabbath and Sabbath keeping.

The problem in that little, dusty, mud-walled synagogue was that the leader, a good man, a religious man, in the name of God's law missed an occasion of God's love. The whole law is an expression of holy love. It is a gift. It is for the purpose of keeping the health and vitality of the community. Its restrictions—its no's—are to keep the bonds of community strong and the individuals in it healthy. The law always points to God and the mysterious reality of God's love. And here it is employed to resist and prohibit the expression of that love. The law allows you to bring your donkey to water on the Sabbath. Jesus said, who wouldn't allow this woman to be given her life back?

It is not an easy lesson for us to learn, however. Religion—with its paraphernalia, its customs and traditions and rituals and liturgies, its hymns and sacred writings and creeds—becomes an end in itself, the maintenance and protection of which becomes so important that people forget the original intent and incredibly act in ways that deny the original beauty and purity. And so you end up with an Inquisition because the church feels threatened by theological diversity. You end up with men in white robes burning crosses and murdering and lynching because they feel threatened by racial diversity. No religion is immune. A CNN three-part special last week, *God's Warriors*, was, I found, incredibly painful to watch. Radicalized, totally committed, ultra-orthodox Jews, Muslims, and Christians—demonizing the other, advocating violence; angry, defiant Jewish settlers, Muslim suicide bombers celebrated as role models, respected as martyrs by

their parents; militant Christians condemning everybody to hell—held up as examples of their respective religions and commanding press attention and often hijacking the helpful healing intent of their own faith.

What gets lost in that whole sad litany is what was missing in the synagogue that day: a sense of God's love for all, everybody; a love that includes all, reaches out to all, deeply into the community, beyond the community, embraces all; a love that heals; a love that does not harm, demonize, hurt, kill; a love that refuses to be diminished or restricted or confined or denied by human prejudice, human laws, human customs, even particularly human religion.

Peter Gomes likes to poke good-natured fun at the way the dynamic plays out between denominations within our own family. In a new book with the interesting title *The Scandalous Gospel of Jesus*, he tells about a guided tour of heaven. The guide takes the visitor through a splendid palace, each room filled with merrymakers. In one room the Baptists are dancing—which they were forbidden to do on earth. Methodists are drinking in another room. Presbyterians are enjoying unaccustomed chaos. Roman Catholics are enjoying guilt without sex. As they turn a corner the guide says, "We must be quiet now: these are Episcopalians, and they think they're the only ones here."

The reader, Gomes says, is free to substitute the denomination of their choice. "Some people cannot imagine anyone else in their eternity." And then, as he so frequently does, Gomes goes deeper, to the heart: "Can serious Christians seriously believe that they are the only ones upon whom God has placed his blessings? If we take the Bible seriously . . . if Jesus Christ is the center of the biblical witness and the one in whom all we know about God is to be found, how do we reconcile his expansive and inclusive behavior with what has so often been the constricted and exclusive practice of the church?" (p. 196).

Your God Is Too Small: that's the title of a little book, a best-seller, British New Testament scholar J. B. Phillips wrote a generation ago. His words still ring true: "The trouble with many people today is that they have not found a God big enough for modern needs. While their experience of life grows in a score of directions, and their mental horizons have been expanded to the point of bewilderment by world events and scientific discoveries, their ideas of God have remained largely static."

Jesus taught about and revealed a God who is big enough: a God bigger than human religions, bigger than religious laws and traditions, bigger even than the most sophisticated and sublime descriptions and theologies and creeds. Jesus revealed a God who is so passionately *for* all people, a God

whose love simply knows no boundaries, certainly not the boundaries religion itself has created.

Jesus revealed a God whose love is in the shape of a cross: stretching down from the highest heavens, all the way down to the humblest piece of earth; a love that stretches outward, all the way to the ends of the earth, a love that is for every man and woman and child. Cruciform love—a cruciform God.

When that love touched a woman who had been crippled, bent over, for eighteen years, she stood up straight, looked Jesus in the face, and praised God.

So you and I who claim his name are invited to the great adventure of living in that love and extending that love into all the world, to all people, near and far; people like us and people who are radically different; other Christians with whom we may disagree on many issues, maybe all issues; other Christians, Jews, Muslims; people of other faiths and no faith—all of them, each of them a precious child of God, each loved and treasured forever by their creator.

My favorite part of this little story is at the end. “The entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things he was doing.” They got it. They understood what was going on. They knew exactly. Ordinary people, living their lives, doing the best they could, like you and me, taking care of business, working hard, caring for their families, trying to make the best of every day, and once a week gathering to be reminded of what it’s all about, that there is a purpose to all of this, that each small life matters, that human life—all of it, mine included, mine and that man’s, that child’s, the poor crippled woman’s—all of it matters, is precious to a God who loves passionately and whose love simply will not be confined, restricted, but will finally find and embrace each one of us.

“The entire crowd was rejoicing.” You bet they were. They knew love when they saw it.

All praise to him, Jesus Christ our Lord.